

What Works in Training Low-Income Youth for Good Jobs: A Conversation with the Director of Year Up New York

By Robert Cherry

In the last decade there has been a substantial decline in youth employment rates. The current employment rate of American teenagers, 16 to 19 years old, is now only one-half what it was in 2000. And the rates are particularly low for black youth from low-income families; around 10 percent by some measures.¹ Given that a large share of disadvantaged youth has a weak attachment to the educational system, many are neither enrolled in school nor have paid employment.

Nationwide one out of seven young people ages 16 to 24 years old are disconnected from school, while in New York City, the disconnected rate is 15.2 percent. However, it is much higher in the black neighborhoods of Central Harlem (23.7 percent) and Ocean Hill, Brownsville (29.6 percent); and the Latino South Bronx (35.6 percent). Overall, the black and Latino NYC rates are more than double the white and Asian-American rates.²

In recent years, there has much more focus on trying to reduce disconnectedness by having more vocational programs in the high schools, especially those that are linked to occupational programs offered by the community colleges. These College and Technical Education (CTE) programs have been quite successful, and indeed, President Obama highlighted one such Brooklyn Program: P-Tech. Other efforts seek to develop more apprenticeship programs.³

There have also been a number of programs to directly help disconnected youth. One such program in Year Up, a nonprofit organization founded in 2000 by Gerald Chertavian, that currently has sites including Atlanta, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. Year Up aims to provide urban young adults with the skills, experience, and support that will enable them to gain and sustain professional careers. It is a one-year full-time program divided between learning and paid internships. About 90 percent of those accepted into the program are black and Latino. Past studies have found that they have a high success rate of placing their students in full-time jobs in the fields in which they trained.

A recent study conducted by the Economic Mobility Commission found substantial earnings gains for Year Up 2007 graduates. Year Up participants who graduated and secured jobs in either of the program's two target occupations, information technology and financial operations, earned the highest hourly wages (\$17.42–\$18.89) and annual incomes (\$24,148–\$28,691). Overall, Year Up participants earned about \$13,000 more than members of the control group over the three years after the program; 32 percent greater than those of the control group.⁴ To better understand Year Up New York, in late August Robert Cherry and Gregory DeFreitas met with its executive director, Alicia Guevara.

Q: What is your background, Alicia, and how did you come to Year Up?

AG: Over the past 20 years, I've been grounded in nonprofit management, varying from fundraising and development to program design, board development and just general management. And really, in service of

numerous communities; everything from neighborhood-based community development to working in youth development to working on prison reform.

What became really clear at some point in my career, maybe about seven years ago, was that my vocation was to work in service of young people. And that caused a shift that landed me directly leading the work of young adults. So immediately before arriving at Year Up, I was the National Executive Director for another youth-serving organization. The opportunity to scale the work of Year Up surfaced, and it was irresistible because we have an economic and a moral imperative to serve young people. The core technology and programming that we offer yields tangible and immediate results, and really helps to move young people from poverty to careers within the span of a year. In March of last year, I accepted the opportunity to become the Executive Director of Year Up New York.



Alicia Guevara
(photo by Regional Labor Review)

Q: Given your long experience, what would you say are the challenges that young people now face, and have those challenges changed over the last decade or so?

AG: I think that in cities like New York, the extent of the challenges that young adults have faced have been consistent. In some ways, they seem exacerbated now, and I think that's primarily because our markets are shifting and transforming so rapidly in ways when, looking at decades past, there was a greater level of consistency in the ways that our markets were operating. But in this age of new technology, everything has just

hit light speed. Young adults today face significant attitudinal and behavioral challenges, and some that are unprecedented. Being liabilities rather than assets in this age, I think, is a huge obstacle that young adults face.

So in the aggregate, I think that young adults today face significant challenges, some that are unprecedented. I think the greatest of these is perception, the perception of young adults as having attitudinal and behavioral challenges -- being complacent, lazy, liabilities rather than assets. That, I think, is a huge obstacle that young adults face.

As a result, I think that the challenges are certainly exacerbated in education, in being economically and financially stable. I think about some of the social services that have benefitted our young adults for so long and the continued need for these social services to be present. We need to place a tremendous amount of emphasis around the ways in which we train our young adults, and not when they're ready to move into the labor market, but much sooner. We need tweaks and enhancements in pre-K through fifth grade. But for the most part, I think those are within reach.

In middle schools, however, where in many ways young adults become lost, I just don't think we're making the levels of investment in training our young adults. And then they get to high school, and we must initiate remediation or the challenges are just overwhelming for the educators, and we just won't have the frameworks in place to properly train young adults to enter the labor market.

I think that it's a realization that we're all coming in touch with. What I'm hopeful about is the shift that we're seeing, particularly in computer technology education, the emphasis on work experience and apprenticeships and jobs that give young adults certainly greater footing around becoming prepared.

That's the work that Year Up has been doing now for close to 15 years: providing training that's relevant and the opportunity to exercise learning in the workplace, to continue to build the skill sets needed to become assets in the economy.

Q: What are the ways in which you distinguish the people you take into the program? They seem to be only maybe a quarter of those people who apply.

AG: Less.

Q: Less? So you've become pretty selective. What are the kinds of things that you look for in the group that you accept?

AG: Year Up is a national organization based out of Boston, and we serve 2,700 young adults annually in 12 cities. New York is one of the larger ones, where annually we serve 270 young adults. Our young adults come from across the New York City metro area, four of the five boroughs. We have a very limited number of students from Staten Island, but about 90% come from New York City proper. They come from Westchester, Lower Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk, and even some from New Jersey.

When I think about our selection process, we have a very rigorous outreach process where we go out and we find young adults wherever they're gathering, whether it's youth-serving organizations or faith-based organizations. Our alumni network is also our strongest outreach source. So being able to give testimony of your experience is very powerful.

And then we have a rigorous admissions process, through which the young adults need to demonstrate their interest in our program. They complete an interest form. It is mandatory that they attend an open house, because it demonstrates their wherewithal to stay connected to the program.

Those for whom the program is the right fit, because the ways in which we train are of interest to them, they come in for a learning assessment. What we assess is baseline reading comprehension, math skills. They then come in for an interview. And that's where we really begin to understand, "What does this opportunity mean to you?" And undoubtedly, our most successful cases are those young adults that have the grit, the motivation, the hunger to transform. Many have had starts and stops, whether it's been in the workforce or with education, but are really ready to take this opportunity on to the next level.

Q: What share of these applicants is excluded because of the testing component, the skill levels that they have? How many make it through that funnel to these interviews?

AG: I would say that maybe about a quarter of the young adults are ones that may not be testing the highest, the numbers lower than what one might think. The greatest sort of screen for acceptance is, "Are we the right program for you based on your interest, professional interest, and your motivation?" And that's something that's very clear. If you're a student who's interested in nursing, thank you for your interest in Year Up, but I'm going to refer you to a colleague who can better serve you, right?

Q: So you're taking in students that have modest skills, but that's not a significant barrier?

AG: No. Our work is really grounded in this notion of high support, high expectations. And so the high support that comes along with enrollment in Year Up. We have a dedicated team of clinically trained social workers that are there to help our young adults navigate what we call the outside noise, those social challenges.

Young adults come with many risks: whether it's need for child care, managing their housing, managing their entitlements. In some cases, they're the primary caretaker in their homes. We've had young adults who have been in transition from aging out of foster care. Some of our young adults have had substance abuse issues. Some have been involved in the criminal justice system. So the risks are intense, and our commitment is to provide this dedicated team of social workers to support them. More than that, we also recruit volunteers that serve as tutors to support their learning, both in technical learning as well as their learning in writing and their learning in math. Everyone on staff is an advisor.

Q: About ten percent of your population is parents?

AG: It's actually a little higher now. It's more like about 20 percent of our population.

Q: So what happens with child care responsibility in the daytime?

AG: We help them find child care in their communities, or sometimes closer to Year Up, which may be more convenient. Those are the types of services that we provide. It's just helping them navigate what resources are available to them, which they may not have access to.

Q: You have modest numbers who have housing issues, who are single parent applicants, and those that have had some college, and those who haven't. Do you find that any of these factors are predictors in terms of who succeeds in the program?

AG: That's a great question. No. We have not found a direct correlation between their risk and their propensity for success. What really leads to their propensity of success is how willing they are and how ready they are to

commit to the expectations of the program. I can think of hundreds of young adults who have had these challenges. We just had a recent graduate who interned at Marsh & McLennan, which has been one of our corporate partners for many years. He just graduated in July. And this young man just landed a job at NBC Universal. He is working as a quality assurance technician. What we didn't know, in fact, is that this young man was a resident of a homeless shelter the whole time that he was here at Year Up. Never missed a day, was here on time. And that's one of many stories, right?

I can think of another young man who's a mentee of mine. One of the first things that I did was have dinner with him when I first arrived, because I'd heard about his story. I was really intrigued. And I just wanted to congratulate him on his success. What he said to me was, "Alicia, what you don't know is, I slept on someone else's couch every single night. Never missed a day here. I was on time every day." I couldn't do that. I know I couldn't do that.

But when you think about it, this was that opportunity for him, and he knew it and really seized it. So for those reasons, I certainly don't see the correlation between the risk factors and propensity for success. What the risk factors do tell us is what's our bandwidth for being able to support and manage these young adults?

Q: I had done interviews on welfare to work, and some of the stories about these people, the lives that they have and how they just navigate them is just inspirational.

AG: It is certainly true of our students who are parents. Because then it's no longer about them. They're doing this for their children. And the stories go on and on.

Q: They're very powerful. Now, you were talking about, you were coming on board, you were trying to rev up the program. It seemed that from some of the evaluations, the driving force of the success of Year Up is that a substantial enough number of those who are accepted in the program graduate and get jobs in these higher-paying fields of IT and finance. And their success drives the numbers. That is, if you take those people who don't get those jobs, and certainly those people who don't successfully graduate the program, they're not necessarily any better off than a random sample.

AG: That's right.

Q: Because of Year Up's proven record, certain companies sign up and pay to have our interns. I mean, it's not like a free good to them.

AG: It is not.

Q: And the question is, as you rev up, are you going to be able to rev up the number of these slots of relatively high-paying jobs, or is that a challenge that you're facing?

AG: I think that the challenge is not revving up the number of jobs. There is a labor gap that exists, and that gap is there because we do a poor job of developing the skill sets to meet those jobs. On the other end of the spectrum, we have millions of young adults who are out of work and who are out of school. In New York City, it's close to 200,000. And so our work has focused on closing what we've coined to be the "opportunity divide."

The challenge for us, when I think about scale, is how can we continue to serve the numbers of young adults that we need to in order to meet the demands of the market? Our primary stakeholder is young adults, ages 18 to 24. And our primary customer is the private sector. It's been a space that we've been exploring

nationally very deeply, because, as we think about growth and scale, there are certainly limitations to what we can do in our intensive core model.

We have been exploring other delivery channels, two in particular. One is what we call the Professional Training Corps, or the PTC, where we work in partnership with community colleges. And the results of working in partnership with community colleges gives us access to greater numbers of students, it helps to capitalize on the infrastructure of the colleges that we work with, and really also begins to shift the ways in which community colleges are approaching education.

So when we go in, it's modeled after the ROTC model. And you see young adults on campus dressed in suits and ties, professionally. Now they're part of this cohort. And it supports their persistence in college. And we get to partner with the community colleges to really benefit from—have our young adults benefit from the services that are offered there. We still offer an internship, but now we're also offering interns who have some college experience, and then ultimately into jobs. That's one service delivery model.

Second, we were originally focused around technical areas that had low barriers to entry in finance and in technology. Now we have an opportunity to develop what we're calling a solutions-based model, where we go to Company X, and say, "Tell us what your hiring plans are." And we listen and build a curriculum that responds to their needs. As a result, we have another way of serving many more young adults that isn't reliant on our primary core model.

So I guess the short answer is, it will take diversification of our service delivery channels to serve more young adults. The jobs are there. The challenge is, how do we continue to serve many more young adults, continue to produce the same outcomes, maintain the same quality, and maintain the same stakeholder, which is young adults ages 18 to 24, low-income who lack of credential and lack of access?

Q: Can you envision yourself partnering with New York Tech right down the block and some of their programs?

AG: I would envision partnering with any number of schools within the City University of New York system. If there's any city that can stand to grow in scale, it's ours, and we certainly have the channels to do that.

Our core will remain, always. It's our innovation center. It's our showcase site. It's where we have proven and demonstrated outcomes that can then be leveraged, perhaps, to partner within the CUNY system, for example, that can also be leveraged to go to any one of our corporate partners and say, "We've had this tremendous relationship for the past eight years. Let's now talk about what your true needs are. How do we build a model that supports this particular area?"

And actually, not just with companies, but I think what we have in New York is a real opportunity to deepen our industry penetration, to diversify our industries, not solely to remain in the technology and the business space. We could go to health care. We could go to advertising. And what it's going to require is that we remain nimble, that the quality of our staff can continue to remain relevant and responsive to support the learning of our young adults.

Q: It seems like most of, if not all of, your funding comes from the private sector.

AG: Primarily it does.

Q: With your scaling up, do you anticipate government funding?

AG: It's a really interesting question. I'm very excited about the new administration in New York City. I'm really excited about their focus on workforce development, with the launch of the Office of Workforce Development under Mayor de Blasio, the launch of the Jobs for New Yorkers Task Force, and this commitment to really bridging the space between economic development and workforce opportunity.

I think now is an unprecedented time, and one that Year Up can benefit from tremendously. And the access that we're finding the administration is providing to shape and influence some of the policies and practices around Opportunity Youth is tremendous exciting. How do we shape the agenda around Opportunity Youth and building opportunities for economic development, workforce development that make sense?

We're currently, a grantee of the Office of Economic Development Corporation of the City of New York. It's a modest grant. But when I think about the impact and significance of our being in receipt of that grant, it really positions Year Up as a model for replication. That's the opportunity that I think we need to seize, both at the local level and at the state level, and in fact, even at the federal level.

Q: Is the grant just to continue what you're doing, or is it to expand to health care and other fields?

AG: No, it wasn't sector-specific, but it was outcome-specific. So what the grant intended to do—and it's a performance-based contract -- is to help us increase our outcomes, help us boost our outcomes. And in fact, we're seeing an increase in our outcomes as a result.

So, for instance, our national standard is that 85% of the young adults who graduate from the Year Up program will land what we call a positive outcome within four months of graduation—namely, employment—and some will enroll in school full time, about 10% of that 85%.

In New York, we're now seeing an increase! So 88% of our young adults on average are landing a positive outcome within four months of graduation. It doesn't go unnoticed that, in large part, that's a result of some of the public funding that we're getting. It's causing us to think differently about the ways in which we do our work.

Q: Has it enabled you to expand enrollment?

AG: No, we haven't expanded enrollment.

Q: More staff?

AG: We've had expansion in staff.

Q: What is your staff now in the New York office?

AG: A staff of 56.

Q: There are other organizations that work with disconnected youth. What distinguishes young adults would do best in a STRIVE program, in a Jobs First program versus Year Up? Are there ways that one decides or evaluates which kind of approach is best for a particular youth?

AG: I think that there are early indicators and assumptions that we can make. When I look at my colleagues, ours is the lengthiest of the programs—it's a year long—whereas some of them are training in much shorter periods of time. So it's not uncommon to see a young adult who's already been through a program that one of our colleagues delivers, and then comes to Year Up New York. One of the attractive pieces of our program is

the apprenticeship, the internship, which is six months long. It's not a week. It's not two weeks. It's lengthy enough that they've dedicated half of a year.

Q: And it's a serious program, because these companies are paying?

AG: Oh, absolutely, so that is not the charitable piece of our work at all. I mean, there is a business proposition here, and when we seek corporate partners, and even our existing corporate partners, we begin with, "How can we train young adults to meet your business need?"

And for the companies, it's a terrific opportunity. It's a try-to-buy model, because if you have acculturated a young adult or a professional for six months, they've yielded results for your bottom line, why wouldn't you hire them? It's just a smart business decision.

Q: You have four tracks?

AG: IT, finance operations, quality assurance—mainly by way of software testing, debugging—and project management.

Q: How important is the soft skill training in your program compared to the hard skills acquired?

AG: For us, it's not either/or. It's absolutely both. The curriculum is split into three seven-week modules. In addition to gaining technical skills, we're also training them in business communications, everything from improving their grammar and their writing to being able to have the vocabulary to strengthen their verbal communication.

Along the way, we also train them on the expectations of communication. You get an e-mail, you respond within 24 hours, or less these days. We also provide personal business math, both to support their math comprehension as it applies to work, but also to manage their personal finances.

And then the other area that we train is professional skills. So our young adults, each participate in a course that's roughly about, I'd say, six to seven hours of professional skills training every week, where they're in a class of about 25 young adults. We train them in everything from learning how to make introductions, how to carry yourself, social etiquette, how to make introductions, how to—by rank, by age, by order, by stature in the organization.

They learn the rules of engagement for operating in some of the most conservative business spaces. And we also provide them with the skills to adapt to some of the more lax spaces, because the young adults that we send to Google are not the young adults that we send to Goldman Sachs.

In addition, our program model is grounded in small cohorts that we call learning communities. We have three of them in New York, two here at our Brooklyn site, and one in Manhattan. They're comprised roughly of 40 to 45 young adults, and a ratio of about 12 staff members per learning community. There's a tremendous amount of professional skills training that happens there, too, everything from working within teams, negotiating conflict.

Being able to give and receive feedback is a core area of professional skills training that we offer. How to overcome challenges. How to be held accountable. So our work is also really grounded in our values. We have six values: striving to learn, respecting others, being accountable, embracing and engaging diversity, valuing others, and working hard and having fun.

When I get feedback from our corporate partners, what they'll say is, "We'll train them. But undoubtedly, one of the added values that you bring is that you teach them these soft skills that we're able to see. We're able to really distinguish Year Up interns on our site." And you see it when you're walking down the hallway, and they're greeting you, and they're welcoming you, and they're shaking your hand. So that, I would say, one of our strengths is the soft skills training that we offer.

Q: Do you get much pushback from young adults in this area? Is their receptiveness an important factor that distinguishes those people who are able to get through the program and those people who are less successful?

AG: I think so. Yeah, I think that's a fair assessment. It's definitely those young adults that are most receptive to the feedback around how to shift their attitudes, behaviors and communications, the ABCs, are likely to succeed the most. And it begins as early as the admissions process. A young adult comes in, and they don't come in with a jacket and tie, we say, "Well, you know, here are the expectations." The next time they come in, if they don't have a jacket and tie, it gives us an indication as to whether or not they were able to apply that feedback.

Another interesting phenomenon that happens is, in the learning communities—and even in the classrooms—they hold each other accountable. So it is not uncommon that a young adult arrives—and you know this, but we have a contract, and that contract our young adults sign when they enroll, and there are certain expectations around behavior, around attitudes, around arrival on time, their deliverables.

And when there are infractions on those expectations, those infractions are weighted in points. Those points are deducted from the contract. Everyone starts out with 200 points, but in essence you can fire yourself if you zero out. Those points are also deducted from their stipends, and these are stipends that they're earning. So the incentive to perform is very high.

That said, it's not uncommon to have a young adult show up late twice, and for their colleague to say, "What's going on? You're slowing us down, and you're slowing yourself down. And the reality is, this opportunity could have been someone else's. So what are you going to do about it?" Right now, we're just welcoming a new class. They're getting to know each other. Week four, five, you see that accountability ratcheting up.

Q: How much of the dropout occurs in the first two months?

AG: Oh, I'd say that's probably where we see the steepest decline, is early on. And often it's because the adjustment period is so steep or challenging. But that's typically where we see the steepest decline. In the last class that just entered in January at the completion of six months, we were able to retain 89% of the class.

Q: That's higher than your general figures have been.

AG: It is. This was unprecedented. We were very thoughtful about the retention strategies that we were going to put in place. And it's important, especially as we grow and scale, to have an indication of—a structural indication of what works. We have a seven-week evaluation, we have a 14-week evaluation, where our young adults are told the areas we celebrate, and they're told the areas they need to correct.

We've really begun to shift our practices such that in fact we're holding staff accountable for matching young adults with the jobs in those fields that they've studied. And it's a measure of the staff's performance, because, quite frankly, if they're going to be working outside the field in which they were trained. well, we've had no value at all. So we've seen a significant shift in that area, I'd say, over the past year and a half.

About 25 to 30 percent of the internships will convert into jobs, permanent jobs. We have some work to do in New York in particular to increase that number, although that is our national standard. There is a team on my staff that we call the career and alumni services team, and their primary job, in addition to working with alumni, is to be a placement agency. And we've thought differently about how to staff that team. In fact, it's primarily staffed by people who come from placement, recruiting, staffing, and so they've developed quite strong relationships with corporations and are really clear about how to advocate for our young adults, and in fact are taking the lead in representing our young adults as their staff. I think in many ways, that's what's caused the shift.

Q: How many years after they graduate would you be able to follow on and help your alums with their jobs?

AG: Forever! In New York, we now have 1,000 active alumni, and growing. So every six months we have a group of another 100 that join our ranks. It's interesting, because when I think about their needs, the growing needs of alumni, it's really their social needs. For many, we are their alma mater, so their sense of belonging to something larger, and their affinity and affiliation with Year Up.

It's about professional networking, because typically about three years into their jobs they're saying, "Great, I'm at the ceiling. I'm ready for the next thing." And so we provide them with that network, professional networking opportunity. And then there's also their social development, because the outside noise doesn't go away. It's all about how do they become more self-directed in order to navigate the social issues that they're seeing?

And so for those reasons, our career and alumni services are almost bifurcated. There's the placement agency side of it, and then there's really the alumni program of it. There's now an alumni association in New York. There's a national alumni association, as well. And we are getting ready nationally to host the third alumni summit. It will take place in New York this year, so we're going to be the host city.

Q: Oh, I want to go! Would you let outsiders in?

AG: Well, you know, I had to hustle to get my way in. But it's interesting, because the summit is less of a reunion. It's really intended to be a conference on professional and personal development. So there'll be sessions around homeownership. There'll be sessions around investments. There'll be sessions around personal branding and those sorts of areas.

I was asked once by someone, "Well, isn't that the responsibility of the corporations that they work in?" Sure. But I also think that we have a responsibility, because they are the movement, these young adults. They are what we call Year Up, the movement.

Q: One of the things that is said to distinguish the professional class from the working class is the degree to which people are in stable personal relationships. And so your population is often coming from a chaotic family environment. Do you see in the graduates a particular movement towards more stable relationships?

AG: I think about relationships holistically. I was just addressing our new class yesterday about this. From the day that our young adults arrive here at Year Up, there are changes that they make in the relationships that they've had, in their friendships, in their affiliations and associations, because of the realization that some of these relationships may not be conducive to their ultimate outcome becomes very clear.

Interestingly, it's very surprising to see a young adult in the communities that we recruit from standing at the bus stop wearing a suit and tie, right? They're either going to a funeral, a wedding or a graduation. And their peers begin to notice and see the transformation and want some of that, too. So we're actually finding that while there are some shifts in relationships that need to happen, their participation in the program can also have a tremendous transformative impact on those young adults in those communities, and adults in general.

In answer to your question, we had our first marriage of Year Up classmates. They graduated in January, and I think they got married like two or three months later. It's not uncommon to see one person go through the program and their significant other—be it their spouse or their partner—go through the program the next time.

So I have a young man who graduated from the program first. His wife then went through the program, and she's now one of our highest-earning alumni. I can think of another couple: he went through the program first and she went later. She was actually one of our first university graduates. She's an NYU alum.

But more than that, we now are seeing homeowners. We're seeing young people who carry their children through the threshold of their homes and put them in their beds, and that child will never know what it's like not to sleep in their own bed, not to have a nutritious meal that's cooked in their kitchen, in the home that their parent bought. And those are the results that we're seeing now.

Q: These are very powerful, and I'm sure make your job very rewarding.

AG: It's what gives me a sense of meaning.

Q: You've already had a major study of your outcomes by the Economic Mobility Foundation, and the Labor Department last month came out with a study of job training, where they cited that study. Is there anything in the works to do research on your alumni further out, to look at your alums three, four, five years out and try to see any patterns there with their job mobility?

AG: Yes. We are currently participating in a Administration for Children and Families study. We're the only group included in the study that is focused on an 18- to 24-year-old population. The study will assess the impact of Year Up compared to a control group of young adults.

Each site has gone through two cohorts. We're just beginning the second cohort. We had to recruit 50% more of the studies that we would typically recruit in order to create a random sample. And as part of that recruitment process, we were very intentional about referring those students out who perhaps were not selected through the random control group to other colleagues in the field, with whom these young adults could truly have a successful opportunity that perhaps was better suited to their needs, or suited to their needs in ways that we couldn't support.

So I'm excited about what this study will demonstrate. It'll be another three years or so — much the same way as the Economic Mobility Study—in order to assess what our impact is. I think what's exciting is that we will be able to see, much in the same way that we saw somewhat with the Economic Mobility Study, the impact that it has on alumni at least three to five years out.

We did a survey of our alumni about a year and a half ago. We had a return rate of 67% across the country. And what we found was most were staying in their jobs roughly three to four years—a real sense of loyalty and commitment to these corporations.

We were finding that a critical mass were homeowners, were seeing some sense of upward mobility. What we also found was that not many were going back and completing college or entering into college.

That said, I want to go back to an earlier question that you asked about the distinguishing features between us and some of our colleagues. Year Up New York also has a college partnership. We partner with Empire State College out of the SUNY system. And at the completion of the first six months of training, our young adults can earn anywhere between 18 to 21 credits, because our training and curriculum has been approved and certified by the state board.

At the completion of an internship, they can earn up to 30 credits, depending on the rigor of their internship and what they accomplished there. So at the completion of the program, our young adults are more than halfway through an associate's degree in some cases. So that's another distinguishing feature.

Q: By the way, La Guardia Community College had a training program for welfare leavers, and they had something for their tenth anniversary. Not surprisingly, not many of their successful students were going on to school because they felt they were in a successful position in their jobs and personal lives.

AG: Absolutely. I think about my background, which was very traditional. You go to a four-year college -- that seemed to be the only way. I think what's really exciting is alternative routes towards financial sustainability and success, Year Up being one of them.

Q: Jobs First New York and Demos have a new study out about the youth jobs crisis. We're five years past the official end of the Great Recession. Unemployment is still relatively high in New York. And this new study found that, among 18- to 24-year-olds who had a high school degree but no college, the unemployment rate is over 11% and underemployment is 20%.

AG: That's right.

Q: What would you say from your experience are some of the major factors besides the lack of some job readiness skills of young people behind these worrisome numbers on youth employment?

AG: I think about the impact of the perception of young adults as liabilities. The consequence of that, I would venture to say, is the lack of a deepened and significant investment by the private sector, to reach out, to recruit, to access these young people. Many of our corporate partners will tell us, "We'll train them. Technically, we'll train them." They may not know how to reach the population that we do, and that's one of the added benefits that we bring to the sector: just being able to recruit and train and teach, not just the hard skills but the soft skills, such that it makes them ready to enter the workforce. So I would say that's a significant contributor.

The Ad Council in launching a campaign around the value of Opportunity Youth, and we're one of several groups that are participating with them. What's exciting to me is, in much the same way that welfare to work required a national campaign to shift perception, here's the opportunity that exists, as well.

And I have to tell you, we're learning by way of real-time feedback loops from our corporate partners the tremendous value that these young adults are bringing, their motivation, their real culture changes.

Q: In terms of your program publicity, it says that you train them in workplace legal issues. So does that include things like worker rights, sexual harassment, even union rights? Do they come out of here knowing more about their rights as a worker?

AG: They do. I mean, this is by way of soft skills, but also by way of their rights. We do a lot of work around sexual harassment, around working across genders. We have a guest speaker series that we bring in. We have a week that we hold twice a year that we call Diversity Week, where we talk very specifically about what it means to be a woman in the workplace, what it means to have a woman as your direct supervisor, if you're a young man. And being sure that they have access to that framework.

We only do a little bit around fair labor standards. But it's more about helping our young adults to be more knowledgeable citizens than anything else.

Q: An issue that's been coming up more and more in the business press as well as the labor press lately is pay transparency. Do you say anything to them about what some call the last taboo, "Don't talk to your coworkers about your pay." Do you raise that issue with these young people?

AG: Yes, we coach our students on potential discussions that arise at work. It may be pay transparency, but it may also be religion, it may also be politics. Because our ultimate goal is to make sure that they have not just the competencies but the confidence to be able to thrive in the workplace and to have some awareness around those issues that may be taboo or inappropriate to discuss.

Q: You mentioned women workers. What about asking for a raise, those kinds of things? Or do you view your role here as getting them a job, and then they should be learning that stuff on the job?

AG: No, absolutely not. In fact, we're very thoughtful and purposeful about helping our young adults negotiate their salary. So it is not sufficient for you to have the offer, but really being able to take stock of your value and be able to leverage that. Negotiation is something we take very seriously. And not just by preparing them to do so, but oftentimes by joining them and coaching them along the way.

One of our women students interned at a social media company, did tremendous things there, but doesn't have her associate's degree yet. They were ready to make her an offer of \$50,000. Because we helped her to negotiate, this young woman was able to increase that. Certainly, issues around gender equity in pay surfaced, very clearly. We were able to do some labor market intelligence and learn what the going rate was. Well, we were able to help her negotiate \$15,000 more to start.

Q: Really? Good for you.

AG: It only gets better. Two months later I saw her at an event. She goes, "Alicia, I have something to tell you." I just got a raise." I said, "You've been there for two months! You just started in August." It was October. She was like, "Yeah, but I just got a raise," and I'm excited and yelling, and she goes, "No, no. It gets better." I said, "What?" She goes, "They just doubled my salary!" She's making \$130,000.

Q: How long since she graduated?

AG: She graduated last July. It was fascinating, because I'm yelling at the top of my lungs, and what she said to me was, "And I'm really scared. I've never made this much money." This is one of the young adults who is married, and her husband's doing quite well, too. But she feels the sense of responsibility around the extended family. And so you think about how we need to continue to support our alumni.

Q: That's a great success story. I hope she continues on that.

AG: Ah, yeah. She's pretty much a rock star. She spoke recently at a social impact conference and they asked her to be a panelist. But she's one of many stars that we have.

Robert Cherry is Stern Professor in Economics at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. His most recent book is: *Moving Working Families Forward: Third Way Policies That Can Work* (NYU Press).

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 17, no. 1 (Fall 2014). © 2014 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University

NOTES

¹ Robert Cherry, "Year-Round Part-Time Employment: A Pathway to the Middle Class," Yahoo Finance (2/25/2014) <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/year-round-part-time-teen-employment--a-pathway-to-the-middle-class-190107084.html>

² "One in Seven," *Measure of America* (Sept 2012) <http://measureofamerica.org/one-in-seven>

³ Robert Lerman, "Can Expanding Apprenticeships Help Families?" *Family Studies* (11/19/2013). <http://family-studies.org/can-expanding-apprenticeship-strengthen-american-families/>

⁴ Anne Roder and Mark Elliott, "Sustained Gains: Year Up's Continued Impact on Young Adults' Earnings," Economic Mobility Corporation (3/2014). <http://economicmobilitycorp.org/uploads/sustained-gains-economic-mobility-corp.pdf>